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My Favorite Four Words

The Ice Age Trail had always been relatively meaningless words that I saw on brown recreational signs while speeding along Wisconsin's highways and byways. Since moving from Chicago to Madison in 2000, I never took a moment to wonder what those words signified. However, in 2020 I took my first step onto the Ice Age Trail and the significance of those words grew exponentially. I am now and will always be flooded with a cascade of emotions and memories and longing at the mere mention of our beloved Ice Age Trail.

The COVID-19 pandemic hit our nation in the spring of 2020 and I hit the trials six months later. As with most fellow humans, I was in search of activities away from my home that included safe social distancing. Prior to the pandemic, my social time was primarily spent in restaurants, bars, movie theaters, concert halls, and museums. Those venues were no longer an option as the virus continued to rapidly spread. I happened across a Facebook post about the Ice Age Trail in the fall of 2020 that piqued my interest. The IATA's annual October Mammoth Hike Challenge was upcoming. Hiking forty miles during the month of October seemed like a great way to safely socialize and be active. The Verona segment was nearby making the Mammoth Challenge more enticing. This maiden voyage on the trail was a simple 1.5 mile out-and-back hike with my 16 year old daughter. No special hiking footwear. No water bottles. No backpacks. No knowledge of what a yellow blaze was. But, boy, did we have fun!

Fast forward 1,253 days and more than 1,140 miles to a very proud IATA Thousand Miller. Me! During that first hike, I never imagined I would pursue this goal. Short IAT hikes on nearby segments in south central Wisconsin evolved into IAT hiking adventures far from home requiring loads of logistical planning. And mistakes were certainly made with some of my planning! But that only added to the adventures. Frustrations along the way came in many forms: locating somewhat hidden trailheads, icy driving conditions, unexpected rainfall, relentless winds, pesky flying gnats, blood-thirsty mosquitoes, hoards of ticks, frigid fording, and the occasional realization that I was off trail. The incredulous joy experienced on the trails however far outweighed any frustrations: amazement with nature's sheer beauty, gratitude for a healthy body, friendships with fellow hikers, introspection during solo hikes, and massive appreciation for IATA volunteers.

With each footstep on the trails, I felt more and more connected to Wisconsin. You might say I fell more and more in love with Wisconsin. Those four words, the Ice Age Trail, have become so much more to me than I could have ever imagined. There was significant turmoil in my personal life during my roughly 3 & ½ years of hiking. I will always consider the Ice Age Trail to be a place where healing, self love, and personal growth can be nurtured. I am eternally grateful for my time on these trails. Who knew a yellow rectangle could be so powerful?